

the poetry of sylvia plath

- essays
- articles
- reviews

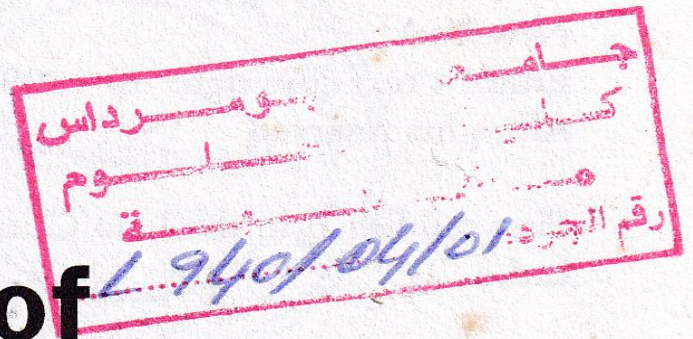
edited by claire brennan

COLUMBIA CRITICAL GUIDES

The Poetry of Sylvia Plath

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INTRODUCTION

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This offers a brief biography of Plath's life, which will introduce the reader to Plath's publishing history, taking into consideration her early publishing successes in journals and magazines, and also the posthumous publication of *Letters Home* and her journals. Initial reviews of *The Bell Jar* and her short stories are considered, before suggesting some recent critical studies for further interest. A brief survey of the critical reception of Plath's poetry introduces the central debates and critics.

CHAPTER ONE

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1960s: Reviews of *The Colossus* and *Ariel*

This chapter offers some of Plath's insights into her work, primarily the 1962 essay, 'Context'. The critical reception of the first two collections of poetry, *The Colossus* published in 1960 and the posthumous publication of *Ariel* in 1965, will be illustrated by a selection of reviews mainly chosen from *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, which highlight the dramatic contrast in response to the early and late work. Influential essays by A. Alvarez, M.L. Rosenthal, George Steiner and Robert Lowell begin to determine Plath's poetry as confessional, extremist and biographical.

CHAPTER TWO

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1970s: Unifying Strategies and Early Feminist Readings

This chapter covers the decade following the publication of two further poetry collections, *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* in 1971. Initially discussing the critical reception of these volumes, this chapter develops to consider the first full-length studies of Plath's poetry. Although the criticism develops in several directions, many critics share a desire for locating unifying strategies in Plath's poetry. We will consider several approaches, including early attempts at psychoanalytic readings such as

David Holbrook's *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (1976), and readings concerned with defining the mythical structure of Plath's poetry such as Judith Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology*. The debate over Plath's use of Holocaust imagery continues, with critics such as Irving Howe and Joyce Carol Oates accusing Plath of misappropriation and solipsism. The second half of the 1970s is dramatically defined by the emergence of feminist literary studies which, by adopting a largely biographical/cultural approach, begin to establish Plath at the centre of a feminist canon. Extracts from two central articles by Sandra Gilbert and Carole Ferrier illustrate the shift in emphasis towards defining Plath as a woman writer.

CHAPTER THREE

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'Waist-Deep in History': Cultural and Historical Readings

The publication of Plath's *Collected Poems* in 1981 causes many critics to reconsider their earlier evaluations of Plath's poetry, leading to a wider understanding of the complexity and diversity of her work. This chapter considers an increasing interest in contextually based, historical and cultural interpretations of Plath's poetry throughout the 1980s. Stan Smith and James E. Young justify the historical references of Plath's work, in particular her so-called 'Holocaust poetry', suggesting that Plath's poetry reflects a postwar political consciousness. Brief extracts from Linda W. Wagner, Margaret Dickie and most recently Garry Leonard, argue for an awareness of Plath as a product of her culture, while also recognising her critique of the ideology of femininity. Finally, Pamela Annas's reading of the increasingly discussed 'Three Women' expands on the feminist interpretations of the previous decade, while Alan Sinfield's inclusion of Plath in *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (1989) raises questions over nationality, and presents his persuasive 'case for extremism'.

CHAPTER FOUR

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Feminist and Psychoanalytic Strategies

This chapter focuses on the developments in psychoanalytic and feminist criticism throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Although grounded in cultural studies, feminist analysis of the poetry begins to engage with the theories of *écriture féminine* in studies such as Alicia Ostriker's *Stealing the Language* (1986) and Liz Yorke's *Impertinent Voices* (1991), moving the critical attention towards poems that are concerned with issues of sexuality and selfhood. Steven Gould Axelrod (1990) and Toni Saldivar (1992) develop sophisticated psychoanalytic readings of Plath, although they disagree on the nature of Plath's subjectivity. The centrepiece of this

chapter is Jacqueline Rose's impressive and stimulating book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, a text that profoundly influences Plath studies. Concentrating on the chapters most concerned with textual readings, 'No Fantasy Without Protest' and centrally 'Daddy', this generous selection will provide the reader with an appreciation of the critical importance of Rose's argument.

CHAPTER FIVE

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New Directions

This chapter suggests possible new directions in Plath studies, offering extracts from recent articles, many of which are in some way a response to Jacqueline Rose. Anthony Easthope forcefully questions Rose's reading of 'Daddy', while Al Strangeways rejuvenates the discussion of mythic structure in Plath's poetry. Anna Tripp's impressive use of post-structuralist practices offers a revised feminist perspective of 'I Am Vertical', while Marilyn Manners further engages with *écriture féminine* in her comparison of Plath and Cixous. The recent publication of *Birthday Letters* may engender further discussion of the literary relationship between Plath and Ted Hughes and, here, Sarah Churchwell critiques Hughes's critical essays on Plath. We conclude with extracts from Tracy Brain's discussions of Plath in the light of ecofeminism, and her consideration of nationality and midatlanticism.

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